BE IMMOVABLE

March 30, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship

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"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable..."
--I Corinthians 15:58 (RSV)

Scripture
I Corinthians 15:51-58

One of the ambigious privileges of living in the television era is that personal tragedy and private grief are brought regularly into our living room. When a public figure dies, the world is invited to witness the grief and to attend the ceremonies. Presbyterian Journalist Hugh T. Kerr, observed one of these events recently and wrote: "Watching the distraught and strained figure standing faithfully beside the casket, listening or not listening to the words of Biblical faith, one must surely say this of the religious service, that here, after all, is what religion is about. It provides the word of hope when everything else keeps silence." [Theology Today, January, 1983]

That is why we are here this morning - all of us and each of us. That is why churches all over the world are crowded today. Most of us would not say it this way: most would be embarrassed to admit it. After all, it is spring time, and the flowers are colorful and it is a most amazing bright day and everyone looks so nice and it's a bit of a family ritual, and all of that is true but what is, I think, more true is that when everything else keeps silence, when life and death intersect with sudden and brutal finality, there is here a word of hope. Some come to celebrate it and sing about it. Some come to speculate, to toy with the possibility. Each of us comes to hear it.

There is nothing the preacher can say to make you believe that the resurrection of Jesus happened. It is, literally, beyond belief, if belief has to do with things we know to be true, can document, verify. Oh, we can - and have - spun out the possibilities. We are learning, for instance, that what we thought we had pinned down about how this world operates isn't pinned down at all, that the unknown is infinite and that the appropriate scientific posture is modesty before the vastness of the unknown if not outright reverence. But we are not much convinced by argument today, by slick efforts to make the event "fit" into our conception of how things are in this world.

John Updike, in a poem, "Seven Stanzas for Easter," expressed it for those who preach and those who listen to Easter Sermons:

"Let us not mock God with metaphor,
Analogy, sidestepping transcendence;
Making of the event a parable, a sign
Painted in the faded credulity of earlier ages."

We are not persuaded by much arguing. We seem to know that if there is evidence here it will be found in some place other than books and scholarly argument. I think we are here this morning because we have seen something of the resurrection in life. We may not have recognized it entirely - but we are stopped in our tracks by heroism that fairly shouts that there is something more important, more real, more powerful than death.

We catch our breath when a dear one, dying, squeezes our hand and comforts us, the living, and says the word of hope: "It will be all right. Everything is going to be all right." We are stunned by the resurrection when we encounter it in life. And the truth is, that life is the only place it has ever been seen. The life of the world bears the truth of the resurrection as a blessed secret.

Martin Marty wrote an Easter essay one time that is a favorite of mine. In it he addressed Jewish friends and said: "Yawn, please, whenever a preacher tries to 'prove' the resurrection. Your boredom will help us face the issue of faith. Silly putty proofs and reasonings insult you and thoughtful Christians. They convince only the convinced. Nervous apologists have to use logic and history to prove that a tomb was empty. But Easter rises from the experience of faith - then and now."

The Gospels do not spend time arguing the case. In fact, when it comes to describing what happened in the early hours of the first day of the week they are historical and literary disasters. Parenthetically, I have always thought one of the more persuasive arguments for the authenticity of the Biblical record is that the writers and the editors had every opportunity to polish these accounts and at least make them consistent. But they didn't do it. In fact, none of the four Gospels even attempts to describe what actually happened at the tomb. "The New Testament babbles about the resurrection"... someone wrote recently. There are major descrepencies in the narratives: different characters are running back and forth, literally bumping into each other, mistaking identities, stumbling around in the dark whispering, some speechless with fright, others sensibly doubting it, still others conspicuously untouched by it all - heading out for dinner in the next town.

"Language reaches its limits here," Hans Kung says about the resurrection. Certainly the language of the New Testament does. Even the resurrection appearances are veiled, muted, unclear. Henri Nouwen wrote the most helpful description I have ever read: "How intimate these events really are," he wrote. "They are like special favors to dear friends. They were not done to impress or overwhelm anyone, but simply to show that (Christ's) love is stronger than death." [A Cry for Mercy, p. 87]

The Easter morning account in Luke which we read concludes with the three women, having found the tomb empty, running back to where the disciples were hiding, trying to tell them what had happened - without much success and then this remarkable understatement "but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." [Luke 24:12]

They didn't believe it! That's wonderful! It took weeks, months,

maybe years, for the people on the spot to assimilate what had happened, even to begin to understand it. Maybe they never did. Maybe they never developed an adequate theology of resurrection. What they most certainly did, almost immediately, is to begin to live differently: confidently, victoriously, sometimes almost brashly - without fear, - because of the power of the resurrection.

The arguments come from a lawyer. Saul of Tarsus was a Pharisee. That was a lawyer of sorts. After his conversion to Christianity he changed his name to Paul but kept thinking like a lawyer, and even though he never saw Jesus, and even though the Gospels don't try, Paul could not resist having a go at it. He presents the resurrection as a proposition to his friends in the Corinthian Church who were Greeks and skeptical and appreciated a well structured argument.

The 15th Chapter of First Corinthians is classic. Paul marshalls every polemic and persuasive resource at his disposal and vigorously prosecutes the case.

...If there is no resurrection, Christ is not raised -

...As in Adam all die, so in Christ all shall be made alive -

...What you sow does not come to life unless it dies -

etc., etc., ad infinitum

And then, as his argument winds down, Paul becomes an artist. "Lo, I tell you a mystery...O death, where is thy victory?...Thanks be to God!" That's poetry...music. The argument is over for Paul. It is time for the singing. But then, abruptly, a complete change. The prosecutor becomes poet, now becomes a behaviorist, almost a cheerleader. "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory... Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable..."

The climax is not a flash of theological brilliance, the unspeakable mystery once and for all reduced to a sentence. It surely isn't physiological. Instead, it is existential, practical, almost mundane. It has to do, not with what people believe, but how they are living their lives... "Be immovable."

The deep question has haunted us from the beginning: "Why must we die?" Why must our humanity disintegrate in front of our eyes? Why this double insult of mortality and awareness of mortality? Alone in creation we know about death. Human philosophy's greatest challenge is to come out any place other than a grim pessimism of emptiness and despair, or a brave but essentially futile defiance in the face of death. The literature of the race is full of it. From Shakespear's "Out, out brief candle" to Emily Dickinson's infatuation with the grave, the poets have been embarrassingly candid about what we've been secretly thinking all these years. Sometimes they have said it elegantly. Thus Edna St. Vincent Milay, on death: "I do not approve." And sometimes they have gathered up our anger with great beauty. Thus Dylan Thomas at the death of his father: "Do not go gently into that good night! Rage, rage, against the dimming of the light."

Now an interesting thing begins to happen to some of us, at least, the more we think about it. Slowly but surely we come to see that our mortality is not the issue: that death may be the ultimate insult but the world would get pretty crowded without it. Slowly but surely we learn a very lovely lesson and it is that without death all the beauty and nobility would go out of our humanity. The Greeks understood that. Immortals can't be noble. In fact, they can't love. The Greek gods are trivial because they don't die; they don't ever have to risk anything. We learn, in time, God's wisdom which is expressed in human mortality. The issue is not living forever. The point is a yearning in our souls which nothing in this life can satisfy, a spiritual reach which exceeds our grasp. German theologian Hans Kung has written eloquently, but simply about his own dying: "I have confidence God will have something further to say, that he has the last word as well as the first, that he is the God of the end as well as the beginning..." The resurrecrtion of Jesus Christ, says Kung, means that Jesus - (and we) - do not die into nothingness, but into that absolutely first and final reality we designate as God. "Death is a passing into God... a homecoming into God's mystery, assumption into God's glory." [External Life, pp. 113-114]

The resurrection means that an ultimate issue about us has been resolved; that we can entrust our future to the loving and just God who created us. That having been resolved, we are left with the yearning in our souls. What we need is some sense that what we are now, in this life, matters, counts for something: that in St. Paul's words - our work is not in vain. That's really it, isn't it? That our work - our labor, our creativity, our love, our dreams, simply do not evaporate with us. That our work - the essence of who we are - has something more than our own mortality going for it. We need some sense of that in order to live, in order to laugh and sing and rejoice.

For twenty centuries his followers have been shouting about it. A battle has been won. It is not about a heavenly diety who transcends the dirt and sweat of humanity to repose somewhere in celestial glory. We have watched this week, horrified, as God lived within creation, taking on our humanity, becoming vulnerable. We have watched as our humanness was embraced and affirmed in that man's life. We have seen the radical incarnation of the occasional senselessness, ever the unfairness and cruelty and meaningless suffering. We have seen all of it gathered in the strong embrace of a Lord who became one of us.

Of course, crucifixion is real. Of course, suffering and injustice and sickness and crulty are real. But these are not the final reality. Because Jesus Christ is risen the rules are changed. Life and hope and joy and love are the final realities in this world. Fear - has no more substance. There is no darkness into which our Lord has not walked. Hatred - has been shown to be ultimately harmless. Integrity and justice and kindness and compassion are shown this day to be the foundations upon which God's creation rests. And battles waged for life are worth fighting because the ultimate battle has been won.

Four days ago a visitor to my office apologized for taking my time from the more pressing requirements of Holy Week. He was there to talk

about a housing project in which this church has an interest and the difficult political realities of zoning and city approval and the financial package and I thought to myself that the apology was unnecessary - inappropriate: that this is what the resurrection of Jesus is about: that it is not a philosophic abstraction or a physiological side show - but a celebration of the victory of life over death, love over hatred, justice over injustice, and an invitation to join the fight.

It is news each of us needs, personally. Life, for some of us, is a series of skirmishes which will begin anew tomorrow morning. For others, life is a sequence of major and critical battles...to find strength to go on loving and caring in the midst of deep and desparate hurt... to resist the temptation to throw in the towel, to accept the end of the dream and compromise both hope and conviction. For some of us life is a battle against the relentless, gnawing compulsion of addicition... For some it is the struggle to be vulnerable again at the end of a relationship so powerful it feels like death or simply to live with a numbing grief over the loss of a dear one, which feels more powerful than anything else at the moment. For some life is the battle against the quiet humiliation of aging, and the loss of strength and stamina which keeps feeling like the loss of significance. For some it is the temptation to give in to the sickness we must battle daily - to surrender to death instead of battling for life. For all of us it is the temptation to begin dying by ceasing to care - about marriage, or the economy, or the nuclear arms race, or justice in the Third World, or integrity in City Hall.

However modest or dramatic, each of us is engaged in a struggle. You, alone perhaps, know what it is for you. You alone know where life and death are intersecting... Each of us needs, more than anything else in the world, for the sake of life, God's gift of resurrection.

"Don't budge" Paul said. Stay with it. Be brave. Your struggle is worth it. An ultimate victory has been won. You are worth something eternal. For you God's love has lived and died. For you God's love lives again. "Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."

Jesus Christ is not dead.

He is Risen...

and he shall reign...forever. Amen.